

### III. ON THE ORIGIN OF THE RUNES

#### 1. Introduction

From a Scandinavian, or rather a Danish point of view, it seems the runic script had its origins in a region that was encompassed by the coasts of the German Bight, South Norway, the area around the Kattegat to the South West coast of the Baltic Sea, with Denmark as its centre. This is a vast area, and it seems appropriate to suppose runic writing had been well under way before the time of our first known attestations dating back to the second century. The aim of this chapter is to show that runes were not necessarily created in this particular area. To investigate the origin of runic writing it would be best to study the origin of runic objects (and runographers), since the place where a particular object is found must not be automatically equated with the place of origin. Both objects and literate people could move and travel. Some clues may be found when answering the question: *who* were the rune-writers, and where did *they* come from. Tracing the provenance of the objects and the names with which the objects were inscribed will appear to be of crucial importance.

According to Ilkjær (1996<sup>a</sup>:74), the oldest runic object (160 AD), the **harja** comb from Vimose, may have been made in regions south of the Baltic. Some of the runic objects found in the Illerup and Vimose bogs may originally have come from Norway or South-West Sweden. The runic objects found in the Thorsberg bog originate from an area between the Lower Elbe and the Middle or Lower Rhine (Lønstrup 1988:94). The runic brooches, found in Denmark and South Sweden, may have been local products. Other early runic attestations have been found in Norway and Sweden. This, however, does not guarantee that runic writing *originated* in Norway, Sweden or Denmark. It only *seems* logical to suppose runic writing had its origin somewhere in those regions. Especially the observation that there are objects from North West Germany and North Poland among the earliest attestations points in another direction. And the origin of two weaponsmiths, who signed their work: **wagnijo** and **nibijo** appears to be the Rhineland.

#### 2. The quest

What constitutes a major problem is the enormous distance between the sites where the oldest known objects were found and the places that could provide an eligible matrix alphabet. It would be more natural to try and trace the origin of runic writing near e.g. the borders of the Roman Empire, especially along the Rhine<sup>29</sup>. If one assumes that there were contacts and relations between Germanic tribes of *Germania Superior* and tribes living near the northern coasts of the North Sea, these contacts could have taken the route along the Rhine, or along the Elbe to the North. Goods and culture could easily have spread from the Rhine estuary to the coasts of the North Sea, or over land, from the Rhine to the Elbe and further on to the Baltic and the North.

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<sup>29</sup> This theory was recently discussed, by Antonsen (1996), who argued against this "Rhenish fans" idea, and Quak (1996), who advocated the idea.

Theoretically, the rune alphabet may have been developed by members of a Romanized tribe, living in regions near the Rhine, possibly in the first or second century AD<sup>30</sup>. Another probability is to try and find the origin of the runic writing system among Germanic mercenaries, serving in the Roman army, who were more or less literate, when returning home after 25 years of service (Rausing 1987, Axboe & Kromann 1992). Merchants may have constituted a third category. These three possibilities will be discussed below.

There were longstanding contacts between the Germanic world and the Mediterranean. Germanic mercenaries worked in Macedonian and Celtic armies; Germanic soldiers served in Caesar's army. The runes resemble archaic alphabets; Greek, Etruscan, archaic Latin and North Italic alphabetic traces can be observed. The archaic Italic alphabets gradually fell into disuse during the last century BC or first century AD, when the official Roman alphabet became the standard. It may be, that Germanic soldiers learned an archaic specimen and introduced this to their homelands.

As the oldest runic attestations have been found far away in the North, the people that passed on the art of writing might be expected to have come from there, but no trace of any northern mercenaries are found. The North has submitted no military diplomata; there are no epigraphic or written sources that point to a Scandinavian origin of Germanic *peregrini* in the Roman army. Nearly all Germanic soldiers were recruited from areas near the *limes*; we find attestations of *alae* and *cohortes* Ubiorum, Batavorum, Canninefatum, Frisiavonum, Breucorum etc. However, if the indication *Germania Inferior* as the place of origin for many mercenaries is interpreted a bit more freely, and if the enormous number of Roman goods in Denmark and Scania is taken into account (Lund Hansen 1987 and 1995; Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>), it may be concluded that there were lively contacts between North and South. These contacts may have been dominated by merchants and craftsmen.

Not only material goods were exported to the North. Roman influence can be seen in many fields, such as dress, arms and armour and also in the names of the seven days of the week, introduced in Rome during the reign of Augustus and possibly exported to the North by Germanic mercenaries, according to Rausing (1995:229f.). Especially *dies Mercuri* is of interest, since its translation is Wednesday, the day of Wodan/Odin. Both Mercury and Odin were inventors of the art of writing (Bremmer 1989:45ff.). Mercury was also the god of trade and merchants, even the god of the dead. It cannot be accidental that Odin, the god of war and warleaders, was his counterpart. We find a merger of several elements that were in evidence at the beginning of our era and that mark the relations between the Romans and the Germans: war, trade and literacy.

An unknown number of Germanic people living in *Germania Libera* had Roman civil rights as a result of serving in the Roman army. The right to obtain Roman citizenship for auxiliary soldiers was introduced by Claudius (41-54 AD). Before Claudius citizenship may have been offered to *decuriones* and perhaps also to *centuriones* (Alföldy 1968:107f.). This citizenship was hereditary. Sons of Germanic soldiers had Roman civil rights and were able to make a

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<sup>30</sup> To establish a rough date for the emergence of the runic alphabet, one is inclined to opt for the first century AD, an inclination prompted by the Meldorf brooch, dated 50 AD. Its legend may be Roman or 'proto-runic'. The main thing is that *script* of some sort was recorded in the first century AD on an object of Germanic manufacture. After this it may have taken quite some time to develop the runic writing system, since the first attestations date from the second century AD.

military career in the Empire; they could even become high-ranking officers (Axboe & Kromann 1992:272). These Germanic soldiers and civilians doubtlessly enjoyed great respect in their homelands. They were also better educated than their fellow countrymen; they had seen the world and were acquainted with a highly developed power structure. Such veterans accelerated the development toward central power in certain Germanic tribes. If bracteates are to be interpreted as class insignia, wearing them may have been instigated and stimulated by the veterans. This group also had the financial means: the gold of solidi and aureii, and they knew examples of Roman writing on coins, medallions and diplomata. Veterans from the first century onwards may well have been at the basis of the weapon-trade from Rome to the North.

From the beginning of the imperial period the Rhine was the *limes* of the Roman empire (Map 1.). The borderzone, where Roman and Germanic cultures met and were able to amalgamate, would seem to be an eligible region for Germanic peoples to adopt and adapt an Italic alphabet, in order to develop a suitable writing system for the Germanic languages. Germanic mercenaries also had the opportunity to get acquainted with a writing system, but they would probably have adopted Latin. This also applies to merchants in Germanic and Roman goods. Artisans, such as weaponsmiths and jewellers are eligible to have used a stock of signs, perhaps inspired by an Italic or Raetian alphabet.

Moltke (1985:63f.) supposed runic writing to have been developed far from the *limes*, because, according to him, relations between Romans and Germanic tribes were hostile in the border regions. There are, however, many instances of a good mutual understanding between Romans and Germanic tribes on the Rhine. There were also wars and rebellions, and this may explain why people felt the need to develop a writing system that suited their own culture and language. The fact that they did not use the Roman script may be interpreted as a wish to deviate from the Romans, to express a cultural and political/military identity of their own. Anyway, the urge for writing came up in the period that Romans and Germanic peoples maintained relations. A Roman practice was imitated by the Germanic people in the epigraphical use of runes.

The use of a metal die, such as is apparent from the weaponmith's name **wagnijo**, which is stamped in one of the Illerup spearheads, is Roman-inspired. In peacetime, soldiers in the Roman army had to practise all sorts of crafts. There are striking resemblances between the ways in which Roman and Germanic weaponry was inscribed, hence a Roman influence on Germanic runic practices cannot be denied. It was a widely observed custom among Roman and Germanic soldiers to write one's name on one's own weapon. But since we have three lanceheads with the legend **wagnijo**, this cannot be anything else but the signature of a weaponmith.

The reasons for the development of a specific Germanic alphabet and writing system may find a parallel in much later medieval English epigraphical and manuscript evidence. It appears that runes were a much better medium for rendering the Germanic vernacular than the Roman alphabet (Fell 1994:130f.). This inadequacy of the Roman writing system might have been one of the factors that led to designing the runic alphabet.

### 3. Runes and Romans on the Rhine

Runes may first have been designed in the Rhine area, since that would fit better from a geographical and cultural point of view. Here conditions were favourable for the adoption of a writing system. Situating the development of a runic writing system in far-away Denmark is literally a far cry. The Germanic North of Europe had an illiterate culture and apparently no need for a communicative system that required writing of any sort, since in the first few centuries of recorded runic writing nothing has been found that may be labelled 'letter', 'record', 'charter' or the like. The fact that the host of runic objects has been found in regions far away from the Roman empire, but also far away from the Germanic provinces of that empire is virtually incomprehensible, unless one assumes there existed special contacts between Germanic groups living near the *limes* and groups living far to the North of Germania. Through these contacts the custom of writing could be transferred, such as carving one's name onto objects. The nature of these contacts will be treated below, in the West Germanic Hypothesis.

The oncoming of the Danish elite in the first centuries AD (see chapter II) seems to be irrevocably connected with runic history. In Denmark (and probably also in South Norway) emerged a society, in which, among other purposes, writing in runes was probably used for increasing value, to objects as well as to one's status. In this way one could aim at uniqueness, and the forming of an elite. It appears that writing in the North was a rare feature, which was much less so in the neighbourhood of the *limes*, where the art of writing (in Latin) was widespread.

An alphabetic system is borrowed by individuals "who have learned the language of the literate culture and then the writing system of that culture, and only then they, or CAN they, attempt to adopt and adapt this foreign writing system to the unwritten language", as is stated by Antonsen (1996:7). I do not expect such an opportunity and such a strategy took place at a great distance from the literate world; instead I suggest adoption took place in a cultural climate such as existed near the Rhine border in the first century AD. Mutual understanding between Romans and Germans flourished from Augustus onward (alternated with occasional depressions), therefore the development of a Germanic writing system should probably be placed in the first century AD. The runic alphabet shows many similarities with archaic Italic alphabets, including archaic Latin. About some of the similarities and differences, see Map 2.

If the knowledge of runes emerged somewhere along the Rhine, one would expect some of the oldest runic objects to have been found there. However, the earliest known runic attestations from the Lower Rhine, the Rhineland and South Germany, formerly the *Agri Decumates* (named after the 10th legion), date from the 4th and 5th centuries. If the place of origin of the Thorsberg objects (*circa* 200 AD) is taken into account: the region between Middle or Lower Rhine and Lower Elbe<sup>31</sup>, we may have a link between the *limes* area and the northerly parts of Germania.

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<sup>31</sup> Some Germanic tribes that lived in this region were Chatti, Langobardi and Cherusci; the latter tribe is well-known from their wars with the Roman army in the first half of the first century AD. The Romans fought under their commander Germanicus; the leader of the Cherusci was Arminius, once an officer in the Roman army (Tacitus, *Annales* II.6-10). Arminius, the victorious war-lord and conqueror of Varus' three legions (9 AD, Teutoburger Wood) still had a brother in the Roman army, Flavus, who fought at Germanicus' side.

From these intermediate parts we have the 4th century Liebenau silver disc from Niedersachsen. Fallward, Bergakker and Aalen are all dated to the early fifth c. This is not enough evidence to support the assumption that runes were developed by tribes living near the Rhine. If, however, the fact that the two second-century weaponsmiths **wagnijo** and **nipijo** (see Chapter V. Early Danish and South-East European Runic Inscriptions, nrs. 2 and 4; both inscriptions are found on objects deposited as war-booty in the Illerup bog, dated *circa* 200 AD) may have come from the Rhineland is taken into account, the probability increases. Furthermore there is the name **harja** on the oldest known runic object (160 AD); this name may point to the tribe of the *Harii*, who, as a sub-tribe of the *Lugii*, lived in North Poland. Peterson (1994:161) mentions **harja** among a group of names "not met with in later Scandinavian but found in West Germanic, esp. in the Lower Rhine region".

The manufacturer of the Illerup and Vimose spearheads, **wagnijo**, who signed his work, (once stamped, twice carved) supposedly came from the Middle Rhine area, to the south of present-day Frankfurt am Main. Here lived the Germanic tribe of the *Vangiones*, to whom **wagnijo** clearly refers. The name **nipijo** on a mount for a shield handle, also found in the Illerup bog, also points to the same region. This weapon smith appears to originate from the tribe of the *Nidenses*, who were neighbours to the *Vangiones*<sup>32</sup>. (See map 3). The *Vangiones* were probably a sub-tribe of the *Suebi*.

There is a time-gap of about two centuries between the attestations of the Thorsberg objects and the Liebenau, Fallward and Bergakker objects. Apart from the fact that finding runic objects is subject to chance, I suggest the lack of any finds from the early period is largely due to depositing customs, which made it difficult for objects to survive (see Chapter II.7, The Continent).

Very few graves from that period have been excavated. The Germanic peoples observed cremation as the major burial rite, and therefore burial gifts did not remain intact. The later Merovingian custom of inhumation created better circumstances under which inscribed objects could survive (unless the grave was robbed, which was quite customary). It is striking that from 500 AD onwards, i.e. from the beginning of Merovingian rule in Germany, a relatively large number of runic artifacts, deposited in graves, have survived. One thing that may have caused runic writing to be practised rather late in South Germany, is the presence of a barrier: the *limes* that separated the *Agri Decumates* from northern parts of Germany. The South was Romanized to a large extent. After the *limes* broke down in the 3rd c., the Alamanni (coming from the North) settled there, but perhaps they did not (yet) use runes. Subsequently, from that time onwards more Germanic peoples immigrated as a result of the Migrations. Some of these peoples (Franks?) must have had runic knowledge. These two complementary explanations could account for the sudden and relatively massive appearance of runes in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. The idea that the Franks knew how to write in runes is based on the fact that at least two famous Franks are known to have been able to write and read runes: the bishop of Tours, Venantius Fortunatus, and King Chilperic, both 6th c. Anyway, it is remarkable that the appearance of runic script coincided with the establishment of Merovingian rule.

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<sup>32</sup> The establishment of some of the names on the Danish bog-finds being derived from tribes' names, was prompted by a map of Germania Superior in Weisgerber (1966/67:200). Here we find the *Nidensis* near the *Vangiones*.

The paucity of runic finds may be explained by the fact that many of the inscribed objects were burnt with their owners on cremation piles, or, if afterwards gathered, were melted and reused. Besides, runes on perishable material like wood and bones will have disappeared. After all, the oldest runic inscriptions that have survived, have mostly been found on metal objects. On the whole, objects of other material than metal have seldom been preserved, since these tend to decay. "Anyway, we have to be aware of the possibility that the arbitrary chances of survival have led us to study a rather trivial group of texts that existed as spin-offs of a much more formal and purposeful tradition, for which the evidence does not survive" as Page (1996:145) has warningly put it.

The Rhine-*limes* extends over a large area. Perhaps it is possible to indicate one or two regions that combined all the conditions needed for a cultural climate that eventually led to the emergence of an indigenous Germanic writing system. I opt for the Middle and Lower Rhine area, the dwelling places of a.o. Ubii, Chatti and Batavi, with the important towns of Colonia Agrippinensium (Cologne), Ulpia Traiana (Xanten) and Ulpia Noviomagus Batavorum (Nijmegen). The tribes living there, generally maintained good relations with Rome. Especially the Ubii and Batavi were held in high esteem in Rome. This is a favourable starting-point for cultural fertilization, since an alphabet is unlikely to be borrowed from enemies under wartime conditions, as happened often in the first half of the first century AD between Romans and Germans, or during the Marcomanni wars (161-175 AD).

The Batavi and Ubii constituted an important part of the Julio-Claudian imperial *corporis custodes*<sup>33</sup> from the time of Augustus (31 BC - 14 AD) onwards until the reign of Galba (68-69), according to Bellen (1981:36), hence we may presume that the loyalty of the Batavi had been well-known in Rome for some time. The Batavi were renowned for their talents as horsemen and for their amazing swimming skills, even in full weaponry, and on horseback. They were considered friends of the Roman Empire; from Germanicus onwards they served the Roman army with outstanding fidelity (Bang 1906:32ff. with ref.). Tribes like these would be brilliant candidates for the transmission of Roman culture and writing. But the Batavian revolt (AD 70) under Julius Civilis should be mentioned here to show that the relationship was not always good. Perhaps the Rhineland of the Ubii is the most suitable place for situating the origin of the runes.

During the reign of Caligula or Claudius the members of the imperial body-guard became united in the *Collegium Germanorum*, and it is generally assumed they were no slaves, but free *peregrini* (Bellen 1981:29ff., 36, 67ff.). After their service, which seemed to end at the age of 40, some veterans returned to their homelands. Their *commoda* (= *praemia militiae*) consisted of civilian rights and money (Bellen 1981:78f.). Among them were literate persons, but, in view of their long stay in Rome, they will most probably have used Latin.

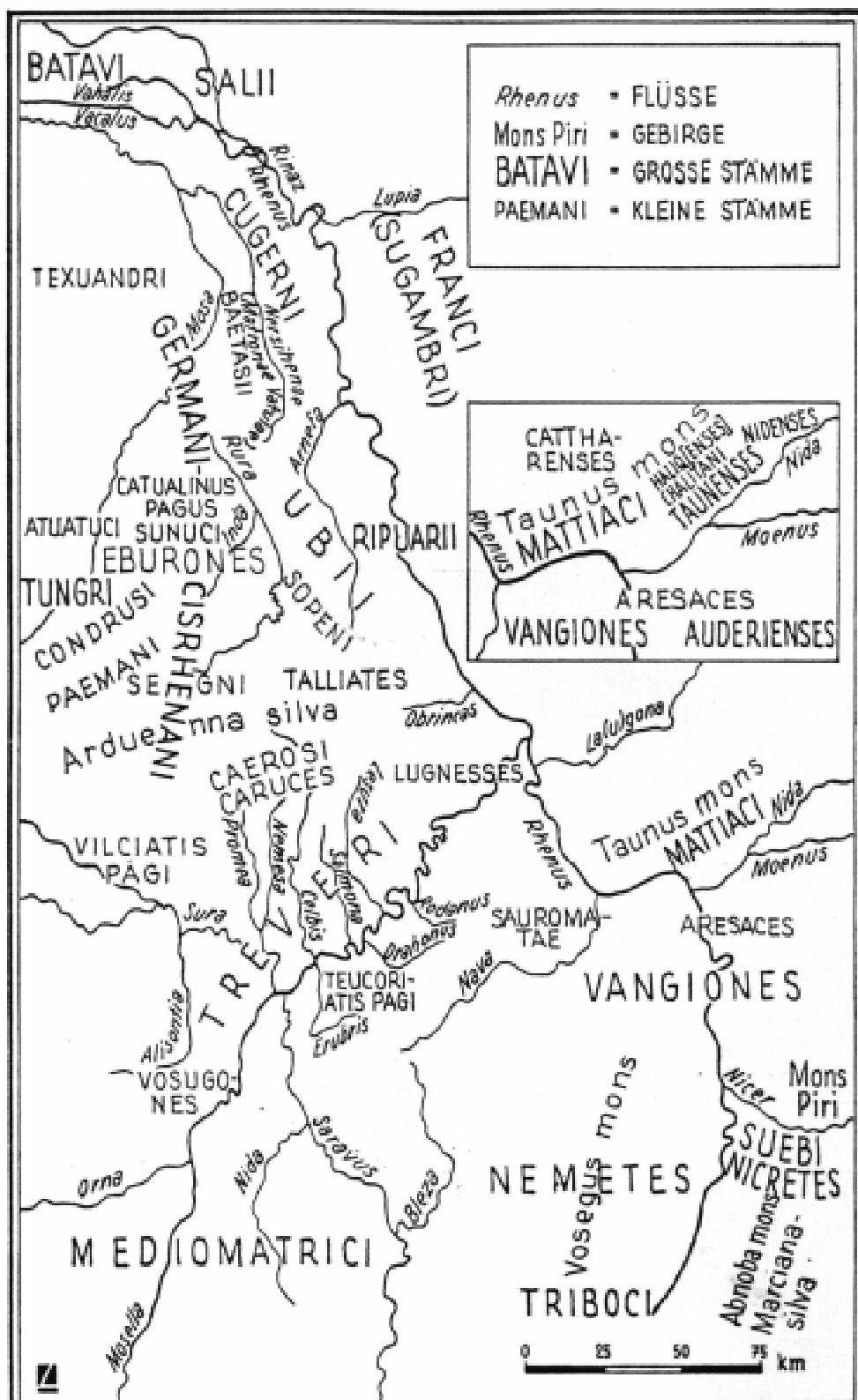
An archaic North Italic alphabet may have been the precursor of the runes. Borrowing this alphabet may have taken place in North Italy or Raetia, where e.g. the Chauci, Batavi and other Germani served as *Cohortes Germanorum* in Germanicus' army in 15, 16 and 69 AD (Bang 1906:58, with ref.). But, theoretically, Germanic mercenaries may have learned to write anywhere during their tour of duty.

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<sup>33</sup> The imperial body guard consisted of *circa* 500-1000 men. It existed already under Caesar and was dissolved by Galba in 69 AD. Their duty was twofold: safeguarding the emperor and acting as crack troops in times of crisis.

Map 3. Names of tribes, mountains and rivers in the Rhineland, Roman Imperial Period.

## RÖMERZEITLICH BEZEUGTE GEBIRGS- FLUSS- u. STAMMESNAMEN



Recently, elaborate information concerning certain first century connections between the Rhineland and the Roman empire became available in the dissertation of Derks (1996). He discusses the indigenous cult of the *matres* in the Rhineland, especially popular among the Ubii. Derks (1996:103f.) points out that there were parallels between the cults of the *matronae* in North Italy and the cult of the *matres* in the Rhineland. Veterans from the Roman army, for the greater part originating from the mountainous parts of Piemonte and Lombardy (e.g. North Italy) settled in the region near Cologne in the first century AD. Soon they became integrated in the local population. Ubian and Italic elements were intermingled in the common cult of *matres* and *matronae* (Derks 1996:104). The indigenous *matres* cult of the Rhineland knew no votive inscriptions; this custom of writing dedications was introduced by soldiers of Italic and Germanic origin (Derks 1996:75). Here we may find a clue as to how an archaic North Italic alphabet came to the Rhineland. In the first century AD, several letters, known from North Italic archaic alphabets, are still in use in the Rhine area (Quak 1996:174ff.).

#### 4. More Roman connections.

All runic finds from the Danish bogs and graves, approximately dating from the period 160-450, have been found in a context that clearly shows Roman connections<sup>34</sup>. The bog-deposits contain Roman goods, as do the graves. Runic finds thus emerged either from a military context or a luxurious, aristocratic, context. In both cases the objects were prestige goods. The runes on the bogfinds were carved on objects that may be linked to the top of the military hierarchy (Ilkjær 1996<sup>a</sup>:70). It appears that Germanic weapons were inscribed in a similar way as Roman weapons (Rix 1992:430-432).

At the time of the Marcomanni wars (161-175), contacts were established between the area of the Lower Elbe and the area of the Marcomanni. An elite from the Lower Elbe region migrated southwards and settled in the Marcomanni region (Lund Hansen 1995:390). The Danish elite from that same period must be seen in relation to Germanic vassal kings, who were, highly Romanized, living near the *limes* of Upper Germany/Raetia (Lund Hansen 1995:390), the region of the Marcomanni, Quadi and Iuthungi. The presence of *Ringknauf* swords in a warrior grave on Jutland and in deposits of the Vimose bog indicates that there were contacts with Central Europe. These second century swords are typically provincial-Roman products, and the owners, like the man from the Juttish grave of Brokaer, must have taken part in the Marcomanni wars. The swords in the Vimose bog belonged to attackers from the South. The sites where these swords were found show that the route was from the Danube northwards along the Elbe (thus crossing the region of Harii and Lugii). At the same time Himlingøje (Sealand) emerged as a power-centre. Here, silver bocals with depictions of warriors holding *Ringknauf* swords point to the connection with the Marcomanni region (Lund Hansen 1995:386ff.).

Ilkjær (1996<sup>b</sup>:457) mentions the princely grave from Gommern (Altmark, near Magdeburg, the region of the *-leben* placenames), which, although about a century younger, can be seen as

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<sup>34</sup> An interesting instance of amalgamation of cultures may be the (partly translated, partly misspelled) name of the Roman emperor *Aurelius Carus* in runes on bracteate Fyn 1 (Looijenga 1995<sup>a</sup>, and Chapter VI. Bracteates with Runes, nr. 11).

a parallel to the rich Illerup deposits. Parallels can also be detected between deposits in the Vimose and Illerup bogs concerning the collections of silver shield-buckle fragments, the pressed foil ornamentation, face-masks, weapons and military equipment. These objects mark the high military rank of the owners. Outstanding silver shield-accessories emphasize the extraordinary rank of the Germanic elite. The same custom can also be observed in late-antique Gallia, in the warrior grave of Vermand, who, by the look of his shield-accessories, was a Germanic princeps in Roman service (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:475).

Among the Illerup material of bronze and iron shield-buckles, Ilkjær notices parallels with finds from Vimose and gravegoods from Norwegian graves (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:475). These belonged to warriors of a lower standing.

An analysis of the pressed foil ornaments on the silver shields proves the close connection; the shields must have been produced in the same workshop, by *Nibijo*, according to Ilkjær (1996<sup>b</sup>:475). Shield-accessories like these can only be found in excessively rich graves, such as those from Gommern (Germany), Musov (Czechia), Avaldsnes (Norway) and Lilla Harg (Sweden). Therefore, the *Prachtschilde* from Illerup represent the very top of the elite (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:476). He assumes this elite conducted the trade in Roman military goods (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:477). Without these Roman goods, the extensive wars that preceded the huge offerings in the bogs, would not have been possible. The elite that organised these wars proliferated themselves by 'barbarizing' the Roman equipment and by decorating them in a Germanic way, which was done in Germanic workshops (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:478). Thus, although the goods make a thoroughly Roman impression, the ornamentation is indigenous, producing a splendid combination of Roman and Germanic culture.

*Lagubewa* was one of the leading princes, according to Ilkjær (1996<sup>b</sup>:485), because of his shield with gilt-silver pressed foil and precious stones; a rich horse's garment probably belonged to him as well. *Wagnijo* and *Nibijo* were war-leaders, too, according to Ilkjær (1996:485), a statement I cannot agree with, since they were most probably weaponsmiths.

The runes on several bog finds are not only found on the most precious objects, but also on humbler things such as the wooden handle for a fire-iron (Illerup V) and the comb (Vimose V). The inscriptions on the lanceheads can directly be connected with the elite, since they controlled the production of these weapons (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:481). From analyses of the pressed foil and pearl-wire ornamentations, it was concluded, on the basis of their highly artistically uniform nature, that there must have been extensive communication with jewellers in Central Europe. The quality of the Thorsberg finds, for instance, points to strong Roman influence. This influence is shown by the use of certain precious stones and the use of mercury (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:481f.).

In the meantime, in the Danish areas of eastern Sealand and Funen wealth and power accumulated and the possession of gold and silver coins increased. Roman luxury goods were imported, probably over sea via the Lower Rhine, through the Vlie along the North Sea coast, through the Limfjord and so on to the north coast of Sealand (Lund Hansen 1995:389, 408f. and the map on page 388). The commissioners who had sent for the luxury goods knew what they wanted; it was no matter of mere chance what came to the North. This also points to close contacts between the clients in the North and the elites living on the border with the Empire.

During the second century, tension grew in the North Sea regions, because of pirate raids by the Chauci. One wonders how safe the route by sea-way really was, but perhaps there were treaties between the Sealand aristocrats and Chauci (and Fresones?), who controlled the North Sea coast.

Most probably there was a relation between political events at the borders of the Roman Empire and several weapon-offerings in South Scandinavia (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:339). The first big attack on South Scandinavia coincides with the Marcomanni wars. The offerings in the Vimose bog (Funen), of which the **harja** comb formed part, were contemporaneous. The attack on Funen came from the South. Further offerings in Vimose and Illerup of around 200 AD coincide with Germanic attacks on the *limes*. Now the attackers came from the North, from across the Kattegat. All over Scandinavia, many graves are found that contain a similar inventory of weapons. These graves are contemporaneous with the fall of the *limes* in the 3rd c. This was no coincidence, according to Ilkjær (1996<sup>b</sup>:339). The initial period of manufacturing weapons on a large scale was at about 200 AD, coinciding with the organisation of armies consisting of hundreds of warriors. We may suppose there existed a powerful and structural organisation at the time. The aim was not merely raiding for loot, there must have been a real struggle for power (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:337ff.). Among the goods in the Illerup bog was an enormous amount of Roman equipment; this of course could not originate from Scandinavia. The wars, predominantly on Jutland, were fought between Scandinavians. All swords were Roman imports and may be interpreted as evidence for the existence of connections between Scandinavia and the Rhineland, according to Ilkjær (in a letter dd. 16 December 1996).

To sum up: in the 2nd c., Germanic groups from the Lower Elbe region moved South, due to the Marcomanni wars in the region north of the Danube. Van Es mentions the Langobardi and the Goths who moved from regions near the Lower Elbe, the Lower Oder and Weichsel respectively (Van Es 1967:537). At the same time an attack was launched upon Denmark from southerly, continental, regions. Booty from these wars was deposited in the Vimose and Thorsberg bogs. Apparently these southerly attackers had contacts with tribes from Sealand (Lund Hansen 1995:406), which may have had something to do with a conflict between Sealand and Funen. The alliance between Sealand and continental Germanic tribes may also explain the route of import goods: via the Rhine estuary and the North Sea, since the route over land and via the Baltic will not have been safe.

In this way the route (of the propagation) of the runes can also be explored. There were contacts between the Rhine region and the North. One must assume the existence of alliances between several Scandinavian elites and continental Germanic ones, living along the Rhine- (and Danube-) *limes*, in the region between lower Elbe and Rhine, and south of the Baltic. The intermediaries of certain crafts and knowledge must have been individuals. Ilkjær locates Wagnijo, Niþijo's workshop and Laguþewa somewhere in the south of Norway. They belonged to a political alliance of peoples from several regions along the coast and inland valleys, according to Ilkjær (personal communication). This does not exclude the fact that they may have come from elsewhere, from the Continent. Their coming to the North may have been the result of the weapon trade between the Rhineland and Scandinavia. They belonged to the top of the military elite, as was stated by Ilkjær (see above), and it was the elite that controlled weapon import and weapon production.

A chronology of the origin of runic objects (from major find-complexes) may illustrate these contacts:

1. Vimose, Funen, ca. 160 AD, from the South.
2. Thorsberg, Schleswig-Holstein ca. 200, from the South.
3. Illerup, Jutland, ca. 200-250, from the North (but made by southern weapon smiths!)
4. Sealand, Jutland, Skåne, grave finds, 200-275, luxury goods, indigenous. The grave-contexts, though, were Roman.

The runic brooches (of nr. 4) are indigenous, so we may assume the inscriptions were made on the spot. Even here the contacts with continental Germanic tribes may also have played a role. The greater part of the names on the brooches appear to be West Germanic: **hariso**, **lamo**, **alugod**, maybe also **widuhudaz** (Makaev 1996:63).

The Danish armies and the enemy from across the sea, from Sweden and Norway and from North-West Germany, fought each other with the same Roman weapons<sup>35</sup>. It is not unlikely that this was stimulated by Roman diplomacy. It is a well-known fact that the Romans donated subsidies and privileges to barbarian leaders, the *foederati*, to keep them in power - with the intrinsic purpose to keep them under control. In exchange for money and goods, the allied Germanic leader had to keep other barbarians away from the borders of the Empire, in order to create a bufferzone. Wars were preferably fought far away from Rome, far away from the *limes* and without Roman troops (Braund 1989:14-26).

It appears that the knowledge of the production of strong iron weapons was not very widespread among the Germanic tribes (Much 1959:84ff.). This probably prompted the import (or the robbing) of Roman swords. Lønstrup (1988:95ff.) states that over 100 Roman swords have been found in the Illerup bog. One part carries stamps and other Roman markings, the other part has no marks, but both typologically and technologically it equals the first part; therefore these were also made in the Empire. These swords may have been bought, captured or obtained as a gift. This last possibility only applies to Germanic *foederati* near the *limes*, because they were involved in the defence of the Empire. The hundreds of brand-new swords which have been found in Scandinavia and Germany, and partly also in Poland, must have been obtained as merchandise (Lønstrup 1988:96).

It is unclear to what extent the Germanic warriors were equipped with swords at the beginning of our era. Behmer (1939:15) informs us that the Germans knew three types of swords: the one-edged hew-sword, the two-edged short Roman *gladius* and the long Roman two-edged sword, the so called La Tène III type, which was used by the Roman cavalry. This sword-type was the basis for the Germanic Migration Period sword (Behmer 1939:18). The one-edged sword was actually a big knife, a *sax*. The *gladius* is of Roman origin and was imitated by the Germans.

Perhaps the puzzling word **kesjam** on the Bergakker scabbard mount may be explained by the assumption that the weapon designations for both swords and spears were confused. At the time the Bergakker inscription was made (early 5th c.), the word **kesja** may have denoted a

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<sup>35</sup> The enormous weapon export to the northern barbarians may have been the result of a Roman divide-and-rule policy, in order to let the Germanic tribes fight among themselves to satisfy their land-hunger. The wealth of some leaders may have been based on relations with high-placed persons in Rome. The gift-exchange system of precious objects belongs also to this atmosphere. Roman soldiers were not allowed to own their weapons - they were state-property. Contrary to this, Germanic mercenaries did own their weapons. Yet, very few weapons have been found in graves; apparently a weapon was a heirloom that stayed on in a family for generations. Captured weapons were dedicated to the gods and deposited in bogs.

certain sword-type; at a (much) later period the word got the meaning of ‘javelin’ (for another interpretation see the Checklist of Runic Inscriptions in The Netherlands). A (vulgar) Latin word for sword was CESA, the equivalent of Germanic *\*gaizaz* (I guess the source was ultimately Celtic). An element such as *Gesa-* is found in the names of the *Gaesatae* and the *Matronae Gaesahenae* and *Matronae Gesationum*. A soldier of the *Cohors I Vindelicorum* was called *Cassius Gesatus*. According to Alföldy (1968:106) the name *Gesatus* is a cognomen, referring to the man’s weapons. Probably, the Germans took over some special type of sword together with its foreign name. As to the tribe of the *Gaesatae* (recorded in 236 BC in the Alps), these people may have been Celts, so perhaps *gaes-* is a Celtic name for a Celtic La Tène sword.

The lanceheads of the Illerup bog were of Scandinavian origin, made in Norway, according to Ilkjær, since an analysis of the iron points to iron ore from North Trondelag (personal communication). However, Roman know-how may have been wished for, a knowledge which may have been provided by Germanic weapon smiths from among the *foederati* of the Rhine area. The obvious connection, then, is that **wagnijo** and **nípíjo** learned their craft as weapon smiths either in their homelands, or as mercenaries in the Roman army, where they also learned to sign their work. Where did they learn to do this in runes? In Norway? Unlikely. They probably learned this together with their craft. A runographic analysis shows a close resemblance between the runic graphs on the lanceheads (**wagnijo**) and the graphs on the shield handles (**nípíjo** and **lagupewa**), which points to the same background of the runographers. Nípíjo, as is mentioned above, had a workshop, where many of the Roman-inspired items, found in the Illerup bog, were manufactured (Ilkjær 1996<sup>b</sup>:440f.). According to Ilkjær (1993) the lanceheads of the *Vennolum*-type<sup>36</sup>, to which the runic lanceheads belong, were widespread in Scandinavia. The runic spearhead from Øvre Stabu (2nd half of the 2nd c.) also belongs to the *Vennolum* type. Ilkjær states that only a few lanceheads from the Continent show some similarity, and that only one item from Poland is of the *Vennolum* type (personal communication).

## 5. The first runographers

Who could read and write runes in an almost illiterate society is subject of an often recurring debate. If one abandons the idea of a purely symbolical, magical or religious purpose of adding runes to objects, the answer is that at least the former mercenaries had learned to read and write, especially the officers. On the other hand there must have been literate people, more specifically craftsmen, among the *foederati*. The literate officers and soldiers must have constituted a small group. This would tie in very well with the observance that runic objects are sparse and emerge from widely separated places. Runic writing may have started as a soldiers’ and/or craftsmen’s skill. This might explain the curious meaning of the word ‘rune’: *secret, something hidden from outsiders*. The runic legends show very simple information, but it may be that the *art* of writing was sort of ‘secretive’, the prerogative of a specific group only, and not necessarily linked to magic or religion. The application of writing, especially on precious objects points to special artisans. Signing one’s name marks the pride of the author, who knows an extraordinary skill. He stands out in society because of his knowledge, and

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<sup>36</sup> Vennolum is a place in Norway, the findplace of the eponymous lance head.

therefore obtains a special status. Naturally, he would be very reluctant to pass this knowledge on to others, which would make it more common. Perhaps this also (partly) explains the extreme rarity of objects exhibiting runic writing, dating from the early ages.

## 6. The West Germanic hypothesis

An indication for a West Germanic origin of runic writing is the presence of West Germanic name forms on some of the oldest artifacts: **wagnijo** and **nipijo** (see above), **harja** (cf. Peterson 1994:161), **swarta**<sup>37</sup>, **hariso**, **alugod**, **lepro**, **lamo** (cf. Syrett 1994:141ff.), and also **laguþewa**. These attestations are from *circa* 200 AD and somewhat later, found in bogs and graves in Jutland, on Funen and on Sealand. Stoklund (1994<sup>a</sup>:106) points to the remarkable fact that all inscriptions that show West Germanic forms or which have West Germanic parallels are on weapons that originate from the area around the Kattegat, Scandinavia or North Germany and which were deposited in the Illerup and Vimose bogs.

Few would claim that a West Germanic speaking people lived in those areas around 200 AD. But individuals such as weaponsmiths and other craftsmen, descending from a West Germanic speaking area, may very well have been present there. Especially the names ending in **-ijo** seem to point to the region of the Ubii in the Rhineland, since this was a productive suffix in Ubian names (Weisgerber 1968:134f.). The problem of the **a-** and **o-** endings, present in the nominative forms of apparently masculine names in runic inscriptions found in Denmark, has long been the subject of discussion. Syrett (1994:151f.) concludes that the early evidence, e.g. up to c. 400, "clearly indicates that **-o** and **-a** could be used side by side to represent the masculine *n-* stem nom. sg., but in the later period, as exemplified (...) by the bracteates, **-a** predominates". Herewith the case has not yet been cleared. Perhaps the problem should be tackled from a different angle. An examination of the recorded names of Germanic soldiers in the Roman army shows that the endings **-a** and **-o** are quite frequent. It may very well be that names featuring these endings were introduced to the North by veterans and craftsmen, such as weaponsmiths.

As has been argued above, **wagnijo** and **nipijo** may have originated from the Rhineland, from the tribes of the *Vangiones* and *Nidensis*. The owner of the Vimose comb (with runic inscription) may have been a member of the tribe of the *Harii*, a sub-tribe of the *Lugii*.

The descent of the man who wrote **harja** on his comb, is supported by a runic inscription on the Skåäng stone in Sweden, reading **harijaz leugaz**, evidently pointing to both *Harii* and *Lugii*. The reading **harijaz** is based on the assumption that the 7th rune is the **z**, corresponding with the 'Charnay' rune **ꝝ** representing **z**. Its ornamental form has as yet not been recognised as the rune for **z** in this Swedish rune-text<sup>38</sup>. **harja** reflects a West Gmc dialect, with loss of final **-z** in the nominative.

Just as in **wagnijo** and **holtijaz** the elements **ijo** and **ija** may be interpreted as an indication of someone's descent, **harja** can be interpreted as referring to someone belonging to the tribe of the *Harii*. A more extended form is the spelling **harijaz** of the Skåäng stone. Above I

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<sup>37</sup> Syrett (1994:141) proposes to view **swarta** and similar instances, such as **laguþewa** as West Germanic strong nouns with loss of final **\*-z**.

<sup>38</sup> Here one apparently felt inclined to read the later Scandinavian **h** or **A** rune, and even a 'repaired' **n** rune has been suggested (see Krause 1996:191, with ref.).

suggested that the second part of this inscription **leugaz** was derived from the tribal name *Lugii*. Apparently Krause (1971:163) and Antonsen (1975:66) were not aware of the possibility of finding a tribal name here. The name *Lugii* appears to be related to Go \**Lugjōs* (Much 1959:378) and Go. *liugan* 'to marry', actually 'to swear an oath'. The root \**leugh-*, \**lugh-* 'oath' is only attested in Celtic and Germanic (Schwarz 1967:30). The *Lugii*, according to Much (1959:378), were a group of tribes, probably unified by an oath.

The *Harii* lived in North Poland, not far from the Baltic. The comb may well have originated in that area, because of its find-context, which, according to Ilkjær (1996<sup>a</sup>:68), consisted of a combination of certain Polish fire-equipment "Indslag af pyrit og evt. polske ildstål", buckles with a forked thorn, and combs consisting of two layers, such as is the case with the **harja** comb (cf. the map in Ilkjær 1993:377 and further on the text on pp. 376-378).

## 7. Conclusions

The Skåäng inscription supports the interpretations of **wagnijo**, **nibijo** and **harja**, as being appellativa referring to certain tribes, and not just personal names. According to Bang (1906:-48f., note 419), Germanic PNs are often derived from tribal names. Other instances are the Hitsum (Friesland) bracteate (approximately around 500 AD), with the legend **fozo**, a PN, which may have been derived from the tribal name of the *Fōsi* (cf. IK, nr. 76, and the Checklist of Bracteates with Runes in the Catalogue), and the Szabdbattyán brooch, with the legend **marings** (see nr. 36 in the Checklist of Early Danish and Gothic inscriptions).

As to tribal names (attested in the Roman period) on Scandinavian stones, we have the forms **haukoþuz** (Vånga), **hakuþo** (Noleby). It may be useful to investigate once again the possibility, whether here the *Chauci* are referred to. Further there is **ekaljamarkiz baij?z** (Kårstad), perhaps pointing to the Bavarians? **swabaharjaz** (Rö) may refer to the Suebi, living on the right bank of the Rhine, **iupingaz** (Reistad) to the Iuthungi (South Germany, north of the Danube), **saligastiz** (Berga) perhaps to the Salii (near the lower Rhine). Birkhan (1970:170, note 243) suggests the patronymic **wagigaz** on the Rosseland stone may contain the PN *Vangio*<sup>39</sup>. If these assumptions are correct, the inscriptions on the above mentioned stones may be dated rather early, on historical grounds, to between 200 and 500 AD.

If **wagnijo** is exactly to be pronounced as *Vangio*, one has to accept the fact that the sequences of -gn- and -ng- both represent the sound [ŋ]. In Roman ears the Germanic cluster *gn* may have sounded like *ng*. At any rate, the spelling of the tribal name *Vangiones* is in accordance with Latin practice. The same applies to the Roman spelling of the folk name *Nidenses*. Since the Romans did not know the graph *b*, they most likely would write a *d* between vowels. Therefore, *Nith-* may be rendered *Nid-* in Roman orthography.

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<sup>39</sup> The runes **fir?a** on Illerup VI may refer to the tribe of the *Firaesi* (Schönfeld 1965:88). Furthermore, one may speculate as to whether the name **harkilaz** of the Nydam sheath plate contains a scribal error; perhaps it should represent **haukilaz**, provided the third rune should be read as **u**, not **r** (its shape, however, is that of an 'open' **r** rune: **ꝝ**). If so, it could be interpreted as a reference to the *Chauci*. Besides, ON *hark-* 'tumult' is difficult to explain as a name-element.

At some time in runic history there existed a rune  $\hat{\wedge}$  to represent the sound [n], but it is not used to represent the sequence **gn** in **wagnijo**. Moreover, the carver applied  $\hat{\wedge}$  to render w: hence the (i)ng rune  $\hat{\wedge}$  may not yet have been present in the runic alphabet of around 200 AD.

Masculine names ending in *-io*, *n-* and *jan-* stems, were especially frequent in the region of the *Ubii*, who were neighbours to the *Vangiones*. The names ending in *-io* reflect Germanic morphology representing the Latin ending *-ius*. The suffix *-inius* was reflected by Germanic *-inio-* (Weisgerber 1968:135, 392ff. and Weisgerber 1966/67:207). Weisgerber mentions the fact that within the *n-* stems of all IE languages we also find the *on-* type, which occurs in specific cases such as *ion-*, a type that is often met with in personal (Germanic) names (Weisgerber 1968:392). "Das Naheliegen von *-inius* bestätigt auch für das Ubiergebiet die Geläufigkeit der germanischen Personennamenbildung gemäß der *n-* Flexion. Mit dieser ist im ganzen germanisch-römischen Grenzraum zu rechnen. Die angeführte Reihe *Primio* usw. ist herausgehoben aus einer Fülle von Parallelbeispielen: *Acceptio, Aprilio, Augustio, Faustio, Firmio, Florio, Hilario, Longio, Paternio* usw." (Weisgerber 1968:394). In fact, in this way the question of the problematic ending **-ijo** in masculine PNs may be solved<sup>40</sup>. The awkward ending **-a** of **lagubewa** (cf. Syrett 1994:44f.) can be solved by accepting the fact that the name may indeed be West Germanic. Syrett states that even weak masc. forms such as **swarta** may be taken as West Germanic strong nouns, the "precursor of ON *Svartr*" (Syrett 1994:45). There is no need to postulate the presence of a runic *koiné*, such is suggested by e.g. Makaev (1996:63). He stated that: "Therefore the runic material, [...] provides important and elegant, albeit indirect, support for our hypothesis on the West Germanic-Scandinavian dialectal base of the runic *koiné*". One may simply change the term 'runic *koiné*' for 'West Germanic origin of runic writing'.

I cannot yet estimate the implications of the fact that the frequent occurrence of runic **leub** (and **leubo**, **leuba**, **leubwini**, **lbi**, **leob**, **liub**) in 6th century Germany may be connected with the many *Leubo*'s in the area of the *Ubii* in the Roman period (Weisgerber 1968:150f., 167, 374f.). The name is also found among the *Tungri* and along the Lower Rhine. A runic attestation of the name is found in Västergötland, Sweden, on the **SKÄRKIND** stone: **skipaleubaz**. This may refer to a Rhenish merchant of skins (containing the element *ski(n)ba-* 'skin'). Another example is **liubu** (OPEDAL), but this may be no PN, but an adjective, or a verbform.

To sum up:

In view of the presence of (1) West Gmc name forms on the oldest runic attestations, and (2) the provenance of some of these objects, in combination with (3) the origin of the weaponmiths **wagnijo** and **nipijo**, one may conclude that runic knowledge was first known on the Continent. (4) The inscriptions **harja** on the Vimose-comb and **harijaz leugaz** on the Swedish Skåäng stone confirm a connection between the North and the continental tribes of the *Harii* and the *Lugii*. (5) The presence of certain elite-weapons and -equipment in the Danish bogs is indicative of a network of contacts between elites from Scandinavia and the

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. also the cognomen *Sinnio*, a Germanic member of the *corpore custos Drusinianus* (Bellen 1981:73ff., note 105; and Weisgerber 1968:135, and 393f.). It may be that *Sinnio* shows West Gmc consonant-gemination, but on the other hand it might just reflect the name of the Roman gens *Sinnius*.

Continent, and especially with provincial-Roman regions. The use of runes is closely linked to these relations. During the second century runic writing must have spread to the North. This is demonstrated by the runic brooches of Sealand, Jutland and Skåne, which were local products. The inscribed Vennolum-type lanceheads, including the lanceheads from Øvre Stabu and Gotland point to the possible presence of runic knowledge in Norway and Sweden, presumably taken there by Rhenish smiths. The weapon-trade between the Rhineland and the North may serve as evidence for close connections. I suggest the runic script was first developed in Romanized regions along the Rhine.

## 8. Some thoughts about the development of the runic writing system

It has been argued (most recently by Williams 1996:216f.) that the runic alphabet must have developed its odd sequence of the *fubark* in isolation, undisturbed by any other alphabet using society. This may be right, but it may be doubted if the runic alphabet had this odd sequence from the very beginning. The rune-order may have been developed far away from the literate world, but the runes themselves must have been adopted and adapted in the neighbourhood of a literate culture. The *fubark* sequence has nothing to do with the ABC and will therefore have been developed separately, i.e. at a later stage than the adoption of the characters. (See Seebold 1996 for an elaborate proposition as to the origins of the curious *fubark*-order). But even for writing minor texts such as *A. fecit*, the writer must have become acquainted with the link between the phonological and orthographic system.

Rausing (1992) and Quak (1996) suppose the runes developed from a provincial italic variety of the Latin alphabet. Quak states that writing in both directions can still be observed in the first century AD, whilst archaic characters such as those found in the North-Italic alphabets also occur (Quak 1994:73f.). In accordance with this view, I suppose several tribes along the Rhine in Germania Superior and Inferior were in a position to learn an archaic Italic alphabet (see also above, 3).

Quak (1996:175) suggests that not all runes, as we know them from *fubark*-inscriptions that were recorded in later times, were initially present. He takes a Latin alphabet of 21 characters as a starting point. For 19 runes the derivation is clear, according to Quak (1996:176f.) and Williams (1996:211ff.).

I take as a starting point the following set: A B C D E F G H I L M N O R S T V X, that is 18 characters, all of which have graphic and phonologic counterparts in the runes. For 6 runes a derivation will have to be sought. Problematic runes are those representing **d**, **p**, **w**, **i**, **z** and **(i)ng**. It appears that some runes have a joint origin.

1. The runes **d** and **p** have a joint origin: the Roman D. In single form this letter yields **Þ**, in doubled, or mirrored form one gets **ᛖ**.
2. The ancient runographers knew how to spell, and had graphic insight, which is illustrated by the creation of the rune **p** **ᛚ**, quite a creative variation of the rune **b** **ᛃ**. The rune **w** **ᛖ** is another variation on **b**. The designer of these graphs apparently was aware of the link between phonology and orthography, since *b*, *p*, and bilabial *w* are homorganic consonants.
3. The **(i)ng** rune **ᛏ** and the yew rune **i** **ᛁ** may have been created at a later stage. I believe both of them are bindrunes in origin, perhaps later interpreted as a separate phoneme, hence their inclusion in *fubark*'s. The yew rune **i** is a combination of **i** and **j**: **| + ᛇ = ᛁ** (see also

Chapter IV, Summary & Conclusions, 11). The **(i)ng** rune's square form □ or ◊ without a hasta only occurs in the fuþark-inscriptions of Kylver and Vadstena; in the Opedal inscription its presence is uncertain.

In semantically intelligible texts, it always appears with a headstaff, representing a bindrune, combining the **i** and ◊ = ϕ<sup>41</sup>. Instances of texts containing the sequence **(i)ng** are: **kingia** (Aquincum), **marings** (Szababattyán), **inguz** (Wijnaldum A), perhaps **witring** (Slemminge) and **ingo** (Køng). The one exception (just ng) is **rango** (Leçcani)<sup>42</sup>.

4. The letter G is clearly the base for **j** <sup>2</sup>. G must have been present in the matrix alphabet. In Rome a sign for the sound g was introduced in the mid-third century BC, so here is no problem.

The rune **g** was represented by **X**. The pronunciation of the Roman X may have resembled the pronunciation of Gmc g, which may be demonstrated by Go. *reih*s = Latin *rex*.

5. The form of the **z** rune **Y** is found in the Etruscan and some North Italic alphabets, where it also denotes the sound z (see Map 2).

I propose the runic alphabet to be derived from a North Italic alphabet, in the first century AD.

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<sup>41</sup> See also: Arntz/Zeiss 1939:357f., and Antonsen 1975:12. Westergaard 1981:136-188 regards it as a single rune; see for a discussion of his material Odenstedt 1990:104f.

<sup>42</sup> I have not much to add to Odenstedt's chapter on the **(i)ng** rune, except for the 4th c. inscription of Leçcani. During my examination of the inscription I could definitely establish that the inscription does contain a rune ϕ (for a lengthy discussion about the **(i)ng** rune, see also Barnes 1984:66ff.).